Understanding By Design Chapter Reflections

**Chapter 1**

The first chapter discusses the differences between Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction. Each of these are essential to creating a successful curriculum and work hand in hand with each other. Understanding by Design centralizes around what is taught and how it is taught to students in an effective manner. Differentiated Instruction focuses less on the subject matter and more on the students it is being taught to. It ensures that curriculums take into account the variety of student and the ways they need to learn. Teachers must have a clear understanding of both of these concepts and be able to use them effectively in their classrooms to ensure student success. While they are both important on their own, without the other, they make the curriculum fall flat. The chapter moves on to discuss ‘axioms and corollaries.’ Axioms are core ideas of Understanding by Design and corollaries are ways in which Differentiated Instruction will allow the axioms to be accessible and work successfully.

These are the building blocks to reaching all of your students needs while still keeping the subject matter and assessment strong and engaging for the students. Many times teachers will be far more competent in one area over the other, which results in a weaker class. Either they neglect students needs and focus instead on the curriculum, which results in less overall understanding of the material and can result in students having a strong disliking of the class. The other way around, with teachers focusing too hard on the individual needs of each student that their curriculums are weak and perhaps far too easy or lacking in direction and meaning.

**Chapter 2**

The second chapter focuses solely on students and the differences between them, and understanding how to understand the individual students. There are a number of different reasons why students could be doing poorly in a class, and it is imperative that you as a teacher work with them to try and solve the problem. In some cases, it comes from outside sources, such as the student's home life or societal expectations placed upon them. These are harder to help with, as sometimes there is nothing that can be done due to the underlying problem being so extensive, but in some of these cases, just getting through to the student could be a stepping stone to helping them reattain success. In other cases, the barriers hindering success might be due to a learning disability or a mental or physical illness. In these cases, it’s important to try and figure out with the student how to overcome these barriers. It may take several different outlooks and attempts to work things out, but helping these students address and adapt to whatever might be giving them trouble is astronomical in helping them success not only in your class but in other classes, and perhaps other areas of their lives as well.

One of the main things that I did take out of this, even though it was not really mentioned directly, is that sometimes, despite even the best efforts and intentions, somethings cannot be helped. In one of the examples given, a girl nearly purposefully fails her classes in the hopes that her newly separated parents will rejoin to address the problem. While it is imperative that teachers do everything they can to help with student achievement, it is also important to know that sometimes we will fail, despite our best efforts.

**Chapter 3**

I think backward planning is a really important tool for teachers, especially when it comes to trying to figure out the whole overarching point of a unit. Starting in the opposite direction, creating lessons first and then bringing them all together in the end, seems like it has much more potential for error. A teacher could be planning lessons, thinking that they will all work together, and then realize they are missing a key point, or don’t really mesh well together. With backwards planning, it kind of helps to eliminate the possibility that you’ll end up with a bunch of lessons that in theory go well together, but in practice are kind of a mess.

I am also a fan of how the text discourages readers, and thus teachers, from solely teaching from the books. Yeah, textbooks can be a good base for Units and lessons, but I’ve often had teachers where their entire class was just us reading the book and then him repeating the same information the next day. He also expected that through all of this fact learning and memorization, we would figure out a way to think more in-depth about the contents. We never did, and because of his poor teaching style, many of us didn’t do well in the class. Sure, if you have a textbook available, it can be helpful to look at the book as a guide towards where you want your class to go, but you should move further than that when actually teaching the material.

**Chapter 4**

This chapter does a really good job of highlighting how many teachers will fail at making their curriculums more accessible to everyone. I think it’s important to show the rights and the wrongs as well, because many readers and future teachers can remember a teacher in their past who unfortunately did things in a way they shouldn’t have. For instance, I know teachers whose plan for when students got too far ahead or completed their work early was to just give them more idle work. He never made any attempts to move them to a slightly more challenging level, he just continued to give them busy work. Likewise, I knew a teacher who would give struggling students less work and even a completely different test instead of trying to figure out why they weren’t understanding the material. This kind of thinking results in neglect for both sides, and can often times lead to students missing the overall point of a unit, or missing out on understanding it further.

The chapter also highlights the idea that it is the teacher’s responsibility for learner success. Every student is capable of learning and understanding the material, and it is up to the teacher to be able to reach each and every student. If someone is struggling, it is the teacher’s responsibility to find out what the issue is and to attempt to solve the problem. While it is the student’s responsibility to try their best to understand the material, you cannot expect them to continue struggling with something they are clearly not understanding as is. Teachers must work with them to find a different route to understanding for the student.

**Chapter 5**

This chapter goes over assessment, what that means, and using the backwards design model to plan your assessments. One thing that I keep noticing throughout these readings, especially this one, is why my teachers used to do certain things and what they were doing that didn’t really fit in with differentiated learning. For instance, I never understood why teachers would require students to show their work or to explain how they reached an answer. But it all makes perfect sense after reading this and realizing that they weren’t just looking to see if we had knowledge in the subject, but if we were really understanding it. Asking students to explain how they got an answer is also a really good tool for teachers to see where students are tripping up. If a student gets a wrong answer but doesn’t explain how they got there, then the teacher wouldn’t be able to look and see where the fault is. It can also show that a student does have an understanding of the material, they just missed a step or may have mixed up information on accident, both things that I have done.

Another part of this chapter that struck a chord with me is feedback. Feedback is so important to me, especially as an aspiring English teacher and as someone who enjoys writing. So often, the only feedback I would get on essays from teachers for most of my school career would be things like “elaborate”, “awkward phrasing”, or “good,” as well as a short sentence or two at the end. This kind of feedback isn’t helpful, and I’m really glad this chapter touched upon that. I always try to give extensive feedback in peer editing and it’s something I intend to bring into my classroom as well.